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## From Fiddler on the Roof to 'father' of the Bangladeshi community

### Paul Cullen humanitarian award goes to solicitor David Bitel

*Fiddler on the Roof* is much more than an entertaining musical to Parish Patience immigration solicitor David Bitel.

Bitel, an accredited specialist in immigration law and an indefatigable worker on behalf of refugees and immigrants, is winner of the 2002 Paul Cullen Humanitarian Award, presented by Austcare at Parliament House on 10 October. The awards are named after Major-General Paul Cullen, the driving force behind the foundation of Austcare in 1967 and, though in his nineties now, still an active member of the Austcare Board.

In accepting his award, made for outstanding service to refugees, David Bitel said he was honoured to receive an award celebrating such an eminent Jewish Australian.

Bitel's background resonates with similarities to *Fiddler on the Roof*. The Sholem Alecheim story of love, devotion and the breakdown of tradition in a poor Jewish family in Tzarist Russia, is, he says, "my own

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family history".

Speaking to *LSJ* from Hobart where he was attending the inauguration of the Tasmanian branch of the International Commission of Jurists, a body he helped set up, Bitel said his family could have been a model for Tevye, the impoverished Jewish milkman and father of five unmarried daughters who, as they grew up, broke with traditional ideas of courtship.

"My grandmother, the youngest of 12 children, was born in 1870 in a village outside Kiev. After being left orphaned by one of the government-sponsored pogroms, families like hers and Tevye's were periodically subjected to, she was brought up by her sole surviving brother. They clashed when he insisted she marry a man of his choice, and on her wedding night she ran off, finding work as a maid in another Jewish house. She met and fell in love with my grandfather and together they fled to Moscow."

Five children later, Bitel's Yiddish-speaking grandmother joined the millions of eastern Europeans who quit the continent between 1890 and 1920, making her way, on her own, not to the United States, but to London's East End.

"She arrived in Whitechapel as a refugee, speaking not a word of English, and unable to read or write, and with five children to feed."

No point in adding, "to educate".

Three more children came along. Bitel's mother, the youngest, born in 1912, was "the only one who got an education". Three years later Bitel's grandfather died and the family were living in abject poverty in the East End.

His mother grew up an activist. She joined the British Communist Party at a time when it was home to many intellectuals, and was involved with the Socialist International that assisted the Spanish Republicans in the Civil War.

"She married my father during World War II," Bitel said. "His parents had also been refugees from the Russian Pale and from a pogrom in Kishinev in Moldavia."

Bitel's parents detested England, its prejudices, bigotry and the class system.

"In 1947 they applied to emigrate to Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Australia was first to respond."

Coming then from two families that had suffered persecution and been dispossessed, but who retained an active interest in European letters and problems, Bitel was raised in an environment focused on broad issues of human rights and social justice.

"Remember the bastards Premier Robert Askin advised LBJ to run over? My mother and I were right among them."

## **Indonesians, Filipinos and Bangladeshi**

In 1973, while a law student, Bitel made a three-month visit to Indonesia and "had my horizons broadened considerably". Since that time he has made many visits there.

"I took out my law degree in 1975 at Sydney University and went straight to Parish Patience - where I remain today - initially to practise in the area of family law."

Changes in the immigration laws impacted hugely on his practice, with its large number of Filipino and Indonesian clients, as did the development of administrative law in the 1980s, a period of intense activism for Bitel, when he was either founding new organisations or joining and gingering existing ones.

He had joined the Labor Party at 15 and later became a member of its State Immigration Policy Committee.

("For six years I was the only Labor alderman on Woollahra Council - what an experience!")

Bitel helped to found the Refugee Advice and Casework Service, the Immigration Advice and Rights Centre, and the Gay and Lesbian Immigration Task Force, the last of which, he says, benefited from his Labor Party connections.

"My political connections helped us get recognition of gay relationships in this area, a world first."

His interest in human rights found additional expression through his membership of the International Commission of Jurists.

Along with other ICJ members he investigated such matters as Indonesian-generated refugee problems

in Papua New Guinea, and the role of right-wing vigilante groups in the Philippines. With Justice Dowd, now of the NSW Supreme Court, he attended as an official Australian observer at the election of members of the Constitutional Convention set up after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos. Later he co-authored a book on President Cory Aquino's failure to keep her promises.

He has been President of the Refugee Council of Australia since 1995. He also set up and heads the Australian Refugee Foundation.

## **Have regard for the stranger**

Bitel's association with ethnic groups is not a remote control affair. He has had a Filipino partner for close to 25 years and takes pride in holding the office of Vice-President of the Philippine Community Council of NSW.

But it's among the Bangladeshis, one of the poorest peoples on earth, that his name conjures up real adoration.

A friendship with a Bangladesh national in the late 1980s brought him into contact with the Bangladesh people and their culture, and since then "over 10,000 have come to live here with my assistance. I am now considered the "father of Bangladeshi Australians". His name is legend in the community, but his reputation has even travelled back to Bangladesh which he visits regularly.

Standing in a queue in Dhaka on one occasion, "I had the amazing experience of overhearing someone say to his neighbour, 'I hear David Bitel's in town, I do wish I could meet him'".

Since 1999 Bitel has "returned to my Jewish roots," and is Chair of the Overseas Jewry and Social Justice Committee, of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies.

"I have really enjoyed this regensis of my life," he told *LSJ*.

Jewish teachings strengthen Bitel in his activism. "'Have regard for the stranger' was a milestone in the development of the Jewish ethos," he said.

"Have regard for the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. It was a hugely radical

principle when it became part of Jewish scripture and its civilising import is just as revolutionary today."

"Social justice activism is," he says, "an essential element of Jewish teaching."

**Mary Rose Liverani**

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